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Erwin, Rachel Melissa

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BY
R. M. E.

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1921

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To
C. R. E.
R. C. E.
and
C. W. E.

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Kate

“Slow up a bit—this place must be the one—
‘On the hard road,’ they said, ‘a trifle more
Than four miles from the town.’ Here’s the
white fence.”

John

“Is it worth while? The rain is blinding, Kate;
The air is stifling and my glasses blur.
I’ve lost my longing to possess a grove;
It’s only sand, and most of that I have
Already in my two low shoes. Let’s go.
Another day will do as well—and look!
‘POSTED NO TRESPASSING’ is on the gate.”

Kate

“Don’t be a quitter, John. What’s a light
shower!
Our clothes are old; the sand is clean—besides
We’re not just trespassers; we’re buyers if
’Tis all they claim it is and cheap enough.”

John

“All right; I’ll go with you if you insist;
But only to the house, not one step more.
I have the key; we’ll take a look inside.”

Kate

“Do come with me just to that highest point.
You see that sagging woodshed, don't you, John,
So interfering with the charming view
Of sky and lake and live-oak trees beyond?
When this is ours we'll clear that out and build—”

John

“Kate, not so fast—it may not be the place
And if it is the price no doubt's too high
For our lean purse. That sugar-cane is hideous
Growing in patches where 'twas once a field;
Some careless workman too has cut that palm—
'Twould take ten years—though if this place *were*
mine
I'd knock that woodshed down right now, and see
The lake beyond—for lake there is—
I get a glimpse of it between the trees
Now that the rain is letting up a bit.”

Kate

“We'll have a woodshed, John, if nothing else—
Though not in just the place where that one is—
Full to the roof with pungent great pine logs
To blaze for us when evenings send us in
Beside our fire, to read and rest and dream
And to watch the moon behind the swaying moss
(Our Arthur Rackham pictures, window-framed).
You know the Bible says to covet not
The servant of our neighbor, nor his ox

Nor aught within his gates—but his woodpile,
John,
It doesn't hinder me from wanting that.
I never see a woodpile, when we two
Are driving through small towns or farming lands,
That I don't wish it mine. It speaks so much
Of comfort, warmed fingertips, of cheer
For frosty nights and lonely, leaden days."

John

"I'm not saying that we will, but if we do
Decide to buy this old neglected place
We'll have a lean-to on the low, gray barn
For tools and gas and oil and such as that;
We'll keep our bags of fertilizer there.
It surely has good lines. The floor is gone;
Partitions must come down, but one week's work
Will change it to a generous garage—
Not too near the house, yet near enough,—"

Kate

"Across the roof we'll fling a flaming vine—
Bignonia vine; it grows so fast down here;
And then we'll have our window-casings match
The color of the trumpets—orange-red;
Just a narrow line of staining near the panes;
The same tone as the fruit upon the trees.
Oh, can't you see it all as I do, John:
The low and sloping porch so near the ground—
And kiddies, John, kicking their chubby legs

And munching cookies, sitting at this end
 Or swinging in the shade of that near tree?
 It's a peach tree, John, I wonder how it came
 To be so near the kumquots and the limes.
 The leaves are tight green buds but blossoms
 pink
 Are thick upon its graceful little limbs.
 Peaches are on it too—green fuzzy things
 For all the world like pussy willows, John."

John

"You're looking far ahead, it seems to me,
 Seeing chubby legs and cookies and a swing
 When our young John is only twenty-one.
 Hand me that key: you women never can
 Unlock a door, or read a Blue Book straight
 Or look up trains or understand a map—
 Someone has tampered with the queer old lock!
 The key won't turn; the lock goes round and
 round."

Kate

"A tramp, a *man* tramp too it must have been
 Who tried and couldn't turn the rusty key—
 Two of you infallibles, you see,
 Have failed to do a thing you bragged about.
 I grant you that we women are not keen
 At locks and keys, but in the present stage
 Of your evolving—you who know so much
 Or think you know it, which is much the same—

You cannot do without us, not quite yet,
Even though there are some things we'll never
learn.

'Where ignorance is bliss—' what are these words
On this old yellow card tied to the key?
A woman's calling card—whose was it, think?
The writing pointed, prim; the letters close;
Not the blind scrawl our schoolgirls practice now:
'KEY TO BENNIE'S HOUSE'—that's what it
says.

Surely his mother must have written this.
Had he a wife and children—help me up
On this big orange-crate and let me see.

The curtain's fallen 'cross the window pane.
'Mud-dobbers' nests are thick on all the walls.
In this front room are tables and a chair,
An old oak sideboard—such a funny one,
A dusty, bulging mattress—and Bennie *was*
A father, John, for I can see a doll
And a baby's shoe. Where is that baby now—
Did the young wife die and leave this pleasant
spot—

Did she leave her little one and her sweet home
(For sweet it may have been when it was new—
Her first real home perhaps) and Bennie—do
You see him old, neglected, sad and bent
Or proud and prosperous, happy and content?

His *name* I think you'll find will always cling.
 We'll say, when clouds and snow are in the north
 And we are longing for the sunny south:
 'How nice 'twill be when we can take the train
 And go back to our Bennie's House again!'"

John

"Come, Kate, these sand-burs sting. Beneath
 the house
 A rattle-snake, perhaps, is coiled to strike.
 The avocado pear trees on the shore
 Are dead from frost, the beggar-weed too thick,
 And pumpkin-bugs have sucked the fruit we pick.
 There's rust on this young tree, and too much
 lime
 Has frenched the leaves; it can't be plowed till
 June
 And June's too hot for a white man to be here.
 Is it worth while—all this—for just us two
 The three short months we stay down south each
 year?"

Kate

"Is anything worth while, then, that we can't
 Have every day, for all time for our own?
 We do not always lose things just because
 We cannot touch them with our reaching hands
 And see them with our all-too-eager eyes.
 Mere nearness is not dearness—you know that—
 Nor can miles divide us ever from our own.

We'll have, just as you say, not many years—
There can't be many but we want them sweet
In spots at least—and this one spot can be
A beauteous one to more than you and me:
To the stranger walking in the dusty road,
To the tired driver on his heavy load,
To the aviator swooping low to take
His morning flight above this quiet lake."

John

"You've missed your calling, Kate, the pulpit is
Your rightful place, with more than one as
audience.

Just save your sermons for the unconvinced;
I want it too—this long-abandoned farm.
There's more fruit here than Bennie's mother
thought.

We'll take two dozen boxes from those trees;
From each, when we have fed and cared for them—
Those tall grapefruit, I mean, those biggest ones.

Suppose we buy it, Kate, and fertilize
The trees, and harrow it right in; and plant
Strong re-sets where those sickly ones now
stand;

And clean the dead wood out and have it burned.
We'll hire a man—a colored man—and women
As they do down here—to hoe the choked fence-
lines.

The fruit will bring returns in the March pool;
 A tidy sum, perhaps, though not, of course,
 As much as later seasons when we've turned
 The maiden-cane, as humus, back to the roots
 And have spread manure to overcome the blight
 That came from too much lime applied one year,
 (A state-wide error that was made, they say).
 I've heard all this of evenings at the hotel
 And this tree talk brings back to me afresh
 The knowledge that I once had from my books
 When I was at an Ag. school for a time.
 I thought I'd be a farmer, then. Come, Kate—"

Kate

"But what about sand-burs and rattle-snakes
 And scale and our slim purse, white fly and rust
 And fleeting years and pumpkin-bugs and frost
 And avocado pear trees winter-killed?"

John

"I want them too; they make it less secure.
 We men don't like to be too sure of things.
 Not being quite sure in groves, just as in love,
 Gives zest to ownership, my constant Kate.
 Though on the whole, when one is loved—Oh
 hark!
 A mocking bird is singing; do you hear?"

Kate

“I hear it and I *feel* it; that’s the delight.
Two shadowy gulls are circling near the lake.
I *feel* their gray wings fan the soft, sweet air.
A startled bunny makes a bobbing spot
Of white, between the rows of orange trees.
I *feel* his frightened feet just skim the ground.
A light wind rustles; it has a soothing sound—
A sound like water lapping—now it is still—”

John

“Stop dreaming, Kate, we must get back to town,
And buy the place. I’ll pay some money down.”

PINE KNOT

A hundred years perhaps you stood
Among your fellows, tall and straight
And clean of trunk; your lines pure Greek;
Short, spreading branches at your top
Festooned with swaying, gray-green moss.

A century of growth, and then
They slashed your bark and rudely bound
Their ugly pots beneath your wounds
And bled you cruelly each year.

That precious life-blood slowly drained
And emptied into filthy vats
And changed to money, again they came
And looked you over greedily.

They put the axe to your rough feet.
Then helplessly your body fell
Upon its needled bed of cones.
A hundred years of growth despoiled.

Nor would they give you sanctuary
On that low hill you dignified.
They tore your roots with dynamite
Out of the earth where you were born,
Out of the sand from which you sprang,
And roughly dragged you to the mill
And cut you into slabs. A mound
Of powdered wood now marks the place
Where "dust thou art to dust returned."
('Twas sawdust in your case, old Pine.)

They burned that mutilated hill;
And now where once you proudly stood,
You and your peers, straight-planted rows
Of citrous trees usurp the land.
Low-limbed they sweep the tawny sand.

Such a short time for them to grow
And bloom and bear when one recalls
How long you stood before you fell.
Such a few years! And I myself
Have watched the changing tracts of land.
The drag; the plow; then sticks with roots;
Then slim, green whips; then glossy shrubs;
Then trees with fragrant blossoms white
And fruit which changed so soon from green
To orange-red of tangerine.

Your stump, grotesque in shape, is here
Within this ingle-nook of mine.
I light it with a single match.
Its splinters catch the tiny flame.
Your veins of turpentine now blaze.
Your blood warms mine, O stately Pine.
Your body wraps me from the night.
Your warmth enfolds me. I am your guest.

AN INNESS LANDSCAPE

AN INNESS LANDSCAPE

(November, 1917)

Within the dreary foreground there
Is something lying. As I look—
My thoughts weighed down with cruel war
And wandering sadly from my book—
It proves to be but a fallen tree,
The winter sunlight showing
Naught else within its glowing
But weeds and spots of snow
Upon a few shrubs low.

And yet, too plainly I can see
A fallen soldier lying there;
His shattered form the broken tree;
The weeds the line of his matted hair;
The snow the dead face turned to me—
“George Inness’ Winter in Montclair.”

* * * *

(November, 1918)

These weeds and spots of snow
Are suddenly aglow.
The tree puts forth its buds of spring;
The gray ground greens, and everything
Behind my eyelids struggles through
Its clod of earth and blooms anew.

THE SONG SHE SINGS

Each night I smile and dance and sing
Behind the foot-lights, cudgeling
My brains to make you laugh.
You really see me only half:
My mimicry, my dialect,
My supple body all bedecked
With tawdry silk and showy lace,
The silly make-up on my face.
Each night you laugh, but hear not half
The song I really sing.

For you I dance, my audience.
For you I sing—to you perchance
I give an hour's forgetfulness
Of anxious nights and fretfulness.
Each night you laugh but know not half
The song I really sing.
Know not that from a mother's soul
This great world-war has taken toll;
That I have given my only lad;
That Death has taken all I had;
That even such as I can rise
Exalted to the sacrifice.

If you will only look behind
My masque, a woman's heart you'll find.
Each night you laugh but know not half
The song I really sing:

The sacrifice I gladly make—
He sleeps that all the world may wake!

THE MIDNIGHT HOURS

THE MIDNIGHT HOURS

Circling slowly, short and tall,
Three black figures on my wall.
Black hip-boots, long swishing hair;
Flapping coats with cuffs aflare;
Knees raised high, lean bodies bent;
Peaked hats at angles quaint;
Cheeks aburst with silent sound;
Slowly circling round and round;
Bringing thoughts of Robin Hood,
Of Dunsinane and Birnam's Wood,
Of Chaucer's Tales, Boccaccio,
King Arthur, and vague lines of Poe.

From their gaping pockets throwing
Small white rose-leaves, like those growing
On the sweet briar bushes low
That grew in Childhood's Long-Ago—
I dream I wake and find them here,
Silhouetted sharp and clear.

Deaf am I to all their droning
Minor strains and weird intoning,
Yet I hear them in my dreaming,
See them, with black hair all streaming,

See them circling short and tall
Shadows on my empty wall.
Low-chanted words a message bringing,
Swinging, swaying—this their singing:

“A mortal dwelleth here, we wot,
Dreaming, dreaming, heeding not
That forevermore the Hidden Powers
Have granted to us—the Midnight Hours—
This quiet room, with its empty wall,
For our circling shadows, short and tall.
Tra-la-la-la, tra-lo, tra-lo,
From midnight till the cock’s first crow.
We’re dropping flower-petals round
You Mortal—you who sleep[’] so sound,
Petals from the buds of youth,
Petals from the blossom truth,
And heartsease, and forgetfulness,
And courage for the day’s new stress.
Surcease, surcease from all sorrow,
Surcease from the dreaded morrow,
Surcease, surcease from clogging care,
Thy Spirit House swept clean and bare.
Unheeding Mortal, all these we bring
As silently we move and sing:
Tra-la-la-la, tra-lo, tra-lo,
From stroke of twelve to the cock’s first crow.”

Half rousing from my fevered sleep,
I gather to my heart the deep
Sweet healing of their singing;
Then watch them glide through the tight-closed
door
And hear no sound of singing more.

But far away, in the dawn's faint glow,
Is the shadowy sound of a cock's first crow.

ALOHA ON

Aloha On—Aloha On
Queen Liliaoukalani.
'Midst yellow flowers lying,
And kahalis of feathers.
A diamond crown upon your head;
Your dress, brocaded satin;
Your hands with jewels covered.

Your women waving slowly
Their wands of mourning feathers.
Your men, in capes of yellow,
Chanting the deeds of valiance;
Chanting the kings, and wailing.

Your catafalque so slowly drawn
Between the kukua torches,
While your servitors, about their necks,
Bear royal household orders.

Aloha On—Aloha On
Queen Liliaoukalani.
The kukua torches light your way,
And Mother Earth will take you.

YOUR ROSES

Just as all things that you wear,
Every tone and shade and line,
Seems to blend with eyes and hair
To make your image rare and fine;
So your flowers, and their green leaves dull,
And the gray vase, and the petals curled—
All velvet-pink and beautiful—
Make rare and fine my sick-room world.

HE AND I

HE AND I

My eyes meet eyes
Across the space
That 'tween them lies
Of linen white
And silver bright.

The table chat
Is vague and dim;
I only know
I'm loving him—
That he's the goal
Of my fond soul;
That all I am,
All I can be
Is his alone
If he loves me.
Oh coming years!
Oh happy tears!

If only I
Were near enough
To touch his hand!
My hand is rough;
Like velvet is
That hand of his.

His smile meets mine
And makes a glow
I can't define.
I love him so!
(The others see
He's much to me
Though no words pass
Between us two.)

Alack! alas!
He says but "Go-o-o"
My darling one!
My baby son!

JANIE

Visiting at grandma's home;
Glad to go or glad to come;
Mischievous and dear and sweet,
With restless little hands and feet.
Listening to all that's said;
Small footmarks on my clean white spread;
Taking off her English sox,
Upsetting my full button box—
"My muvver lets me do it."

"I'm just as clean as I can be,
So don't you get those towels for me.
You won't give me a bath, I hope,—
And please don't wash my face with soap!
My muvver never does it."

Carrying all her things to bed:
A teddy bear, a dolly's head,
A big conch-shell, two limp rose buds,
And other precious baby duds—
"My muvver lets me do it."

"Goodnight, sleep tight, not one more peep,
Shut up your eyes and go to sleep.

And grandmother'll turn out the light—
For a sleepy girl it's far too bright."

"But I don't want you to shut the door;
Just open it a tiny more!
My muvver all'as does it!
I want another kiss and hug;
I want a drink from that white mug;
I want my pillow th' other way,
And O grandmother, won't you stay
Where I can see you fru the door?
I've never slept in here before.
My muvver all'as does it."

* * * * *

At last the brown eyes are closed tight.
At last I can shut out the light,
And that dear kiddie's darling head
Is snuggled halfway down the bed.
Her feet are out, her arms are bare,
The useless pillow's fallen where
She'll never find it if she wakes.
The whole sweet picture surely makes
Me think how, many years ago,
Another brown-eyed one I know—
Her mother—always slept just so.

YOUTH AND AGE

YOUTH AND AGE

Youth cries for *things*.

Impetuous Youth! She cannot know
How weary grow the feet, and slow
The imaginings.

Youth sees a flower

And straightway wants a garden, quite
Her own, with hedges bright—
And wealth, and power.

Youth sees a home—

A nestling home among the trees
With grape-vines, roses, birds and bees—
This too must come.

Where garden ends

Youth covets 'neath those drooping trees
Gay coats and gowns and charming teas
For many friends.

But Age craves rest.

She longs for neither wealth nor power;
She only wants her quiet hour
With those loved best.

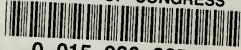
THEY

True—he had not escaped all ills—
 Though flair of youth had visioned high,—
Or kept his feet upon the hills,
 Or always glimpsed the azure sky.
But through the mists and pouring rains
He *sometimes* walked on mounting plains.

And she—her castles of ideals
 Had fallen, either stone by stone,
Or had been wrecked by storms and peals
 Of thunder. They were prone
But vine and blade had covered o'er
The ruins, and she built no more.

Small chance fulfillments here and there
 Amidst the unattained goals,
Like low brave pennants, straight and fair,
 Caught the west sun—renewed their souls.
They trekked along without complaint—
This pseudo-sinner, pseudo-saint.

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